



HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE  
Montana State Legislature  
Helena, Montana

March 16, 2011

Re: Opposition to HB610 – Secs.5,6,7-Increasing the Maximum Amount of Fire Protection Fees

The Montana Forest Owners Association hereby opposes HB610 and requests removal of Sections 5, 6 and 7, for the following reasons:

- **The fire assessment was recently raised.** Family forest owners currently pay an increased fire assessment fee that, during the 2007 Legislative Session, was carefully negotiated with the DNRC, legislators and others to cap the percent of the total budget paid through assessments at 1/3<sup>rd</sup>. This number was carefully negotiated as the “fair share” of the additional cost of providing wildland fire direct protection to private lands.
- **Many landowners are currently paying THREE TIMES for fire protection.** Many family forest owners pay the wildland fire protection assessment, local fire district taxes, in addition to the General Fund and property taxes.
- **The proposed 51% cap is unfair.** 4.1 million acres of landowners that currently pay the assessment account for only 8% of the 50 million acres of land that receive some level of protection from the DNRC. While the 8% of lands may receive a higher level of service than the remaining 92% not paying, that extra value has been determined through negotiation mentioned above and fairly capped at forest landowners paying 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of costs.
- **HB610 will cause many landowners’ fire protection taxes to increase 65%.** HB610 arbitrarily charges more for the exact same level of service.
- **All Montana citizens benefit from Wildland Fire protection.** Not only do wildfires threaten rural landowners, but also higher density housing and towns. Smoke also has a significant impact on cities as well as tourism. DNRC fire fighting benefits everyone.

Family forestlands range in size from 10 acres to 10,000 acres. They are homesteads and working forests that are often passed from generation to generation. The fire assessment fee recognizes not only the service forest landowners get from DNRC wildfire protection, but also the work and financial contributions family forests provide in reducing wildfire hazards and providing access. A well-managed family forest is an asset to wildfire suppression and control, not a liability. All Montana citizens benefit from the work that family forest owners do to provide a buffer between wildlands and urban areas.

HB610, Sections 5, 6, and 7 is basically unfair and a result of short term “easy” budget manipulation and not reflective of long-term planning for cost effectively providing services and equitably assessing costs. MFOA is ready and willing to work with the agency and others (possibly through the reactivation of the Interim Fire Committee) to develop long-term funding solutions to provide wildland fire protection to Montana’s entire 50 million acres.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

*Debra Parker Foley*

Debra Parker Foley, President